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# ***Wrestling Observer Newsletter***

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The WWE, the city of New Orleans and the Mercedes Benz Superdome announced officially on 2/18 that WrestleMania 30 would be at the Superdome on April 6, 2014.

While not announced, several sources have confirmed to us that the planned main event is The Rock vs. Brock Lesnar. We've noted this several times of late on the radio show. Rock had looked to face either John Cena or Lesnar this year, with the decision being made to go with Cena and the WWE title program this year, and with Lesnar in 2014. What makes that notable is it would appear not to make sense for HHH to get his win back from Lesnar at WrestleMania this year if that's the direction.

It will be the first pro wrestling event at the Superdome in nearly 15 years. The Superdome once was a hotbed of pro wrestling, where the major events of Mid South Wrestling took place for the entire tenure of that promotion.

Vince McMahon, just a few weeks removed from hip surgery, spoke at the press conference. It was noted that McMahon had made the decision and told Alan Freeman, who runs both the Superdome and the New Orleans Arena (which will host the Hall of Fame Ceremony on April 5, 2014, and Raw on April 7, 2014) in a meeting back in November of 2012 but told them to keep it quiet. Both sides talked about how the secret never got out, even though it was reported in numerous places for months.

New Orleans is a major party city, which has only once hosted what would be called a major travelers pro wrestling event, the 1986 Crockett Cup, which had an afternoon and evening session in the building on April 19, 1986, a joint venture between Jim Crockett Promotions and the UWF, the promotion that evolved from Mid South Wrestling. Crockett, who had national television on WCW, but didn't have PPV, advertised the show heavily on all his television shows, particularly on TBS. Attending the show, it was the first time I was at a show where it appeared most of the fans were not from the area, as nobody sitting anywhere near me was actually from New Orleans. It was also the first time Watts advertised a Superdome show on his entire television network and not just on his local New Orleans station.

With the exception of Jim Duggan, who was Watts' biggest star at the time and who had top-tier charisma, the big stars to the live audience were not the wrestlers who were there regularly, but Crockett's big guns of Ric Flair, Dusty Rhodes (who had both had long histories as guest attractions brought in for the Superdome shows) and the Road Warriors. The economy in that part of the country was in bad shape, and while the show was very good and seemed like a special event, the attendance was a major disappointment to both promotions, with only about 4,000 people attending the afternoon prelim show and 13,000 at the evening show.

The Superdome's all-time attendance record is 78,344 for the 1997 Sugar Bowl game, but the building has been reconfigured. A sellout for the New Orleans Saints and football now is 73,209. For a WrestleMania, so much of a building is blocked off, more than the number of seats that can be on the floor. Freeman said they expected 70,000 fans for the event, and 65,000 is a more likely legitimate number. However, WWE usually exaggerates WrestleMania attendance between 10,000 and 15,000 to announce building records. The WWE predicted 125,000 tourists would be in town for all the festivities. They claim in excess of \$100 million in economic impact at last year's show in Miami, and New Orleans, a strong tourist and party city, should yield at least close to similar results.

WrestleMania is nothing close to a Super Bowl, a Final Four, or a major auto race like the Daytona 500, or BCS championship football

game, but it is right there on the list with the biggest sports or entertainment events a city can host.

It's hard to say whether they would be able to draw a legitimate sellout. Most WrestleManias in recent years have come a few thousand shy of a sellout, although all are announced as sellouts.

The Rock vs. Lesnar would match the two biggest PPV draws currently in pro wrestling. However, neither is a regular with the promotion, so it would figure they would promote a match with full-timers at almost an equal level.

The Superdome first expressed interest in housing WrestleMania in 2009. WWE has done a number of its movies in the city due to favorable economic and tax incentives.

John Saboor, the WWE's Senior Vice President of Special Events, who is the point man for WrestleMania and in getting major cities to bid on the event, hosted the press conference. Among those speaking included New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu and New Orleans Saints owner Rita Benson LeBlanc. WWE had many of its wrestlers at the press conference, since they were in town for the Elimination Chamber PPV.

Speaking from WWE were Vince McMahon, Stephanie McMahon, Dwayne Johnson and John Cena. They pushed that Johnson and Cena was the main event at this year's WrestleMania.

Johnson noted that he had been at the Superdome once before, as a member of the Miami Hurricanes. The Hurricanes, national champions in 1991, lost in the Sugar Bowl to Alabama 34-13, in a game that decided the national championship on January 1, 1993, and Johnson said he's still not over it.

The Superdome was at one time one of pro wrestling's hotbeds. At one time, an argument could be made between the Superdome and Madison Square Garden as to what was the prime wrestling building in North America, and since more big names were imported for Superdome shows, during the heyday it probably would have to have had the edge. But that was a long time ago. Virtually none of today's WWE performers have ever wrestled in the building.

The only wrestlers who have ever wrestled in the arena who have a decent shot at appearing on next year's show are The Big Show, Chris Jericho and Rey Mysterio, who wrestled there in the late 90s when WCW did three successful live Nitros from the building. Jim Ross would be the only person who dates back to the heyday of pro wrestling in the building, as he worked for Mid South Wrestling when they would run the building several times per year for their biggest events, and would have attended the vast majority of the biggest events held there.

The first pro wrestling event at the Superdome was on July 17, 1976, when Leroy McGuirk was still running the city with Bill Watts as his booker and partner. Watts spearheaded going into the Superdome, a move that most thought he was nuts to try. New Orleans was not known as a good wrestling market, and it's not like they were frequently selling out the arenas. Watts felt, and correctly so, that if he put on a loaded show, the likes of which people in the city had never seen, the lure of wrestling at the Superdome would draw people who would normally never attend. In many ways, this was the beginning of the concept of quarterly supercards.

With long-term booking to shoot major angles to coincide with the events, or build major matches, from a conceptual standpoint, it was

the forerunner to the WWF booking a decade later to peak big events for PPV.

That first event drew 17,000 fans, headlined by Terry Funk retaining the NWA world heavyweight title beating Watts via doctor stoppage because Watts was bleeding too badly to continue, plus Dick Murdoch beat Killer Karl Kox in a Jim Bowie Death match, which was the term they used for a blindfold match. The big local star going for the world title and the two big rivals in a unique gimmick match, and yes, the blindfold match on that night was a huge draw some would argue the biggest reason for the success of the first show, were the key elements. The show was promoted four matches deep, as far as headline attractions, with Andre the Giant & Buck Robley beating Ken Patera & Bruiser Bob Sweetan, and Dick the Bruiser going to a double disqualification with Abdullah the Butcher in the other big matches.

On July 22, 1978, a crowd of 23,800 fans set what is believed to have been the all-time indoor gate record for pro wrestling at the time of \$142,675 for a show headlined by Ray Candy beating Ernie Ladd in a cage match. The other two top promoted matches were North American champion Paul Orndorff beating Bruiser Brody and in a battle of outside top national attractions, as Dusty Rhodes beat Superstar Billy Graham.

To locals in the city, the two most talked about and well remembered events at the Superdome were the two biggest shows in the history of Mid South Wrestling, one in 1980 and the other in 1984.

On August 2, 1980, Watts did arguably the greatest angle of his career. In a take-off on the Fred Blassie vs. John Tolos angle in 1971 in Los Angeles, they had Michael Hayes' Freebird hair-removal cream end up in the eyes of Junkyard Dog, who Watts was promoting as his biggest star. It was announced that JYD was blinded and would never wrestle again. A couple of weeks later, JYD's then-wife gave birth to a daughter (who later accepted his WWE Hall of Fame award after JYD's 1998 death in an auto accident, driving the Rolls Royce Watts had sold him back in 1984 back from his daughter's high school graduation that he had arrived late for, missed, and his daughter had already left with her friends). It was promoted that even though blind, JYD would come back in a dog collar match inside a cage against Hayes, which drew 28,000 paid and \$183,000, both indoor pro wrestling records.

That ushered in the glory years, where shows at the Dome drew 15,000 to 25,000 fans, and with exaggerations, were said to have drawn up to 35,000.

The other big one on April 7, 1984, called The Last Stampede, was built around Watts coming out of retirement for one tag team match against Jim Cornette's Midnight Express. Watts & Stagger Lee (Junkyard Dog under a mask, as he had lost a loser leaves town match) beat Bobby Eaton & Dennis Condrey before 25,000 fans paying \$176,000.

The attendance figures are more impressive when you consider the Mid South shows were only promoted in New Orleans off one local television station. Watts didn't even promote the shows on his syndicated television, since in his other major markets like Houston, Oklahoma City or Tulsa, he would book similar matches and only promote the local market. That was notably true with the Last Stampede, where in each city it was pushed that Watts was only doing one match and it happened to be in your home city.

Watts ran his last show at the Superdome on April 11, 1987, drawing just 3,000 fans for a show headlined by Steve Williams vs. One Man Gang for the UWF title and The Freebirds (Terry Gordy & Michael Hayes & Buddy Roberts) beating the Angel of Death & Bill Irwin & The Viking.

After Watts sold to Crockett, Jim Crockett Promotions ran two more times in the building, but also didn't do well, and it was done as a regular wrestling venue at the end of 1987.

Even though WrestleMania will clearly replace those two shows as the biggest and most remembered wrestling events ever in the city, they may never be topped when it comes to just the local audience. Those shows drew those figures just from the local audience. WrestleMania's attendance, likely legitimately in the 65,000 range, will be more a tourist crowd. In recent years, the actual local market ticket sales for WrestleMania usually range from 15,000 to 18,000. I would suspect New York this year to be higher, but New Orleans, if anything to be lower.

Ironically, on a national and worldwide basis, the single most famous match ever held at the Superdome was the biggest box office disaster ever in the building.

WCW ran a show on April 2, 1989, at the Superdome, a Clash of Champions head-to-head with WrestleMania that year. There were a lot of politics that went behind that show. Vince McMahon was at war with several of the cable companies in late 1988, and to send a message to him, they contacted Ted Turner. Over the years, McMahon had pressured the cable companies to keep Jim Crockett first off PPV, and later, run free shows on television head-to-head, hurting his numbers. WCW a year earlier had run a free show against WrestleMania, and Mania numbers were down greatly from the year before. At that point the cable industry told both WCW and WWF that there were to be no more free shows on television head-to-head with PPVs from the other company. By that time, Crockett was out of business, partially because McMahon's maneuverings eliminated his expected PPV revenue of millions of dollars. The Crockett family had to sell to Turner Broadcasting.

McMahon and the cable industry had a battle and it led to cable giants calling up Turner and asking him to put on a PPV on April 2, 1989, in the WrestleMania time slot. The plan was to teach McMahon a lesson by forcing him back to closed circuit and not letting him on PPV, which would have cost him millions. So WCW booked the Superdome and set up a Ricky Steamboat vs. Ric Flair rematch, as Steamboat had beaten Flair for the NWA title at a time when title changes still meant a lot. McMahon, who isn't used to backing down, had to in this instance. At that point, the cable people who had told WCW and Turner outright they weren't carrying Mania, changed their tune, but realized WCW had done them a favor and was getting screwed, so allowed them to run the free show.

New Orleans was dead by this time as a wrestling city. The city was weaned on the Bill Watts Mid South style, and when it went down, they wanted nothing else. WWE, even with Hulk Hogan & Junkyard Dog, couldn't draw. WCW couldn't either.

Jim Herd was new to the business when he booked the Superdome, which was insane. They were doing 5,000 fans in their good cities on a good night, going into a bad city in a building that large was nuts. Then, George Scott as booker, who was still stuck in the 70s, believing house shows were the priorities, didn't push the Flair vs. Steamboat match on TV at all until the last minute, and even then not hard, because they were doing the same match at all the house shows and he thought it would kill the house shows if people could get the big match on free television.

So, they had to paper like crazy. Even with papering, they got only 5,300 people in the building, with 1,500 paid. As for Flair and Steamboat, they had one of the greatest matches of the era, a two out of three fall match that went 55:32 that was being talked about after it was over as being one of the greatest matches in history. It was not a secret the two were going 60 minutes to a draw in a rematch of their classic match a few months earlier in Chicago where Steamboat won the title. But they decided to cross people up, with Steamboat scoring a controversial pin with Flair's leg under the ropes at a point when everyone was sure they were doing the draw. That Clash of Champions drew a 4.3 rating, and in a note, a prelim match on the show saw Junkyard Dog beat Butch Reed, who years earlier in the glory days, headlined on their own and drew 21,700 fans.

When it came to classic matches, Flair was the king of the Superdome. During his second run as NWA world champion, even though Mid

South Wrestling was not an NWA member, they would bring Flair into the territory as world champion. On August 24, 1984, during a period where Flair and Kerry Von Erich were tearing it up with some of the best matches nearly every time they wrestled (ironically their most famous match, as Texas Stadium, shortened because it was a television taping, was no more than a basic good Flair match and nothing compared to their other matches in Texas, St. Louis, Hawaii and other markets), they had one of their best matches at the Superdome before 21,000 fans. Flair also beat Butch Reed in 44:00 on August 10, 1985 before 15,800 fans and had a great match on June 14, 1986, beating Ricky Morton before 7,200 fans.

The latter show, which was promoted more around Watts (coming out of retirement for the third time, which was no longer a novelty) & Rhodes & Steve Williams beating The Russians (Ivan & Nikita Koloff & Korsita Korchenko) in a street fight was when the market and the promotion were on the downslide.

I can recall talking to Watts after the show, and he knew there were problems because they expected far better results. Morton, was a big star in the area during its strongest business period ever as part of the Rock & Roll Express a few years earlier. By that point he was a Crockett regular and this was a feud off Crockett's television. Morton and Flair tore down the house in the match. It may have been the best Superdome match to date, but he said it was clear that the audience would buy the Rock & Roll Express as a tag team against anyone, but he felt the gate showed that they never believed Morton on his own could win the world title.

The Von Erich, Reed and Morton matches were all taped for Power Pro Wrestling, which was Watts' B show at the time. The production values were similar to the single or dual camera shoots without television lighting that promotions in those days often did for big house show matches. But WWE should have copies of all those tapes with its purchase of the Mid South collection. I know as a fact they have the Von Erich match, because years back, when the Wrestling Gold collection was done, Kit Parker was negotiating a deal with the Watts family (Ene Watts, Bill's ex-wife, got the tape collection in the divorce settlement) and there was talk of me and Jim Cornette doing updated voiceovers for DVD release. However, the second release of Wrestling Gold was not the success the original one was, and the next edition, which would have been the greatest matches of the Mid South collection, was never released.

WCW ran three Nitros at the Superdome. The first, on January 13, 1997, drew 10,034 fans. The second, on January 19, 1998, drew 20,614 fans (18,201 paid). Both of those shows featured Hulk Hogan vs. The Giant (Big Show) matches. The final one, on June 21, 1999, drew 17,249 (15,593 paid), with Sting vs. Sid Vicious as the main event. But in all cases, it wasn't a card that drew, but the idea of Nitro coming to the city. That show was considered a huge disappointment because they paid big money to get Master P, a star rapper, to appear, with the idea he'd lead them to record business. While they did what would normally be considered a strong number, Master P didn't get much of a reaction, and was actually a heel when they expected him to be a face, and because of the cost of getting him, the show wasn't a success.

### **BIGGEST EVENTS IN SUPERDOME HISTORY**

July 17, 1976 - Terry Funk b Cowboy Bill Watts via blood stoppage to retain the NWA title, Dick Murdoch b Killer Karl Kox in a Jim Bowie death match, Andre the Giant & Buck Robley b Ken Patera & Bob Sweetan, Dick the Bruiser NC Abdullah the Butcher (17,000)

April 1, 1978 - Harley Race b Dusty Rhodes via DQ to retain NWA title; Ernie Ladd DCOR Andre the Giant to retain North American title, Thunderbolt Patterson b Stan Hansen to win Brass Knux title (20,000)

July 22, 1978 - Ray Candy b Ernie Ladd in a cage match, Paul Orndorff b Bruiser Brody to retain North American title, Dusty Rhodes b Superstar Billy Graham (23,800)

December 25, 1978 - One-night tournament for United States tag team titles ending when Andre the Giant & Dusty Rhodes b Ernie Ladd & Stan Hansen with Danny Hodge as referee. Others in the tournament: Jack & Jerry Brisco, Terry Latham & Ricky Fields, The Angel (Frank Morrell) & Gama Singh, Wahoo McDaniel & Jim Shields, The Assassins, Bobby Jagers & Jerry Brown, Mike George & Randy Tyler and Ron Bass & Ron Slinker (15,000)

April 21, 1979 - Dusty Rhodes & Cowboy Bill Watts b The Assassin & The Angel, Mr. Wrestling II b Killer Karl Krupp to retain North American title in a lumberjack match, Black Atlas (Tony Atlas) & Charlie Cook b Stan Hansen & Bruiser Brody via DQ (16,000)

July 21, 1979 - Cowboy Bill Watts & Buck Robley b The Assassin & The Angel in a cage match for the U.S. tag team titles, Mr. Wrestling II b Ernie Ladd via DQ to retain the North American title, Dusty Rhodes b Killer Karl Kox

August 2, 1980 - Junkyard Dog b Michael Hayes in dog collar match in a cage, Dusty Rhodes & Buck Robley b Terry Gordy & Buddy Roberts in a double bullrope match, Ted DiBiase b Mr. Wrestling II to retain the North American title, Andre the Giant DCOR Hulk Hogan (28,000)

April 18, 1981 - The Grappler (Len Denton) & Super Destroyer (Scott Irwin) b Junkyard Dog & Dick Murdoch in finals of a tournament for the Mid South tag team titles. Other teams: Jake Roberts & Jimmy Garvin, Andre the Giant & Dusty Rhodes, Afa & Sika, Ernie Ladd & Leroy Brown, Tony Charles & Don Diamond, Michael Hayes & Terry Gordy and Buck Robley & Cocoa Samoa (22,000)

July 4, 1981 - Junkyard Dog b Paul Orndorff in a lights out match, Kerry Von Erich b The Grappler to retain the American title, Dick Murdoch & Junkyard Dog b Afa & Sika to retain Mid South tag titles, Paul Orndorff b Jake Roberts to win North American title, Super Destroyer b Tommy Rich to retain Louisiana title (18,000)

November 26, 1981 - Junkyard Dog & Mike George b Paul Orndorff & Bob Orton Jr. to retain Mid South tag titles, Ted DiBiase b Bob Roop to retain North American title, Dusty Rhodes b Great Kabuki, Ernie Ladd b Kerry Von Erich via count out (18,000)

May 1, 1982 - Junkyard Dog & Mr. Olympia (Jerry Stubbs) b Afa & Sika in a lights out match, Bob Roop b Paul Orndorff to retain North American title in a taped fist match, Harley Race & One Man Gang b Andre the Giant & Dick Murdoch via DQ, Ernie Ladd b The Assassin via count out, Ted DiBiase b Tully Blanchard (16,000)

July 7, 1982 - Ted DiBiase DDQ Junkyard Dog to retain North American title, Junkyard Dog & Mr. Olympia b John Studd & Super Destroyer to retain Mid South tag team titles, Andre the Giant b Killer Karl Kox (22,800)

November 25, 1982 - Stagger Lee (Junkyard Dog) b Ted DiBiase to win North American title, Tony Atlas b Jim Duggan via count out, Ted DiBiase & Matt Borne b Terry Gordy & Buddy Roberts, Mil Mascaras & Chavo Guerrero b Gino Hernandez & Tully Blanchard (15,000)

April 16, 1983 - Junkyard Dog b Mr. Olympia in a cage match to win North American title, David & Kerry Von Erich b Terry Gordy & Buddy Roberts, Ted DiBiase & Mr. Olympia b Mr. Wrestling II & Tiger Conway Jr., Andre the Giant b Kimala (21,400)

April 7, 1984 - Cowboy Bill Watts & Stagger Lee b Dennis Condrey & Bobby Eaton in a lights out match, Jim Duggan b Krusher Khrushchev (Barry Darsow) in a coal miner's glove match, Mr. Wrestling II b Magnum T.A. to retain North American title (25,000)

July 16, 1984 - Junkyard Dog b Butch Reed in a Ghetto street fight, Magnum T.A. b Ted DiBiase to retain North American title, Dennis Condrey & Bobby Eaton b Ricky Morton & Robert Gibson to retain Mid South tag titles (21,700)

August 24, 1984 - Ric Flair DDQ Kerry Von Erich to retain NWA title, Dennis Condrey & Bobby Eaton b Dusty Rhodes & Sonny King (21,000)

August 10, 1985 - Ric Flair b Butch Reed to retain NWA title, Kimala & Kareem Muhammad (Ray Candy) b Cowboy Bill Watts & Dusty Rhodes in a loser leaves town match, Ted DiBiase & Steve Williams b Nord the Barbarian & Jake Roberts in a cage match, Dick Murdoch b The Champion (Randy Culley) to win the North American title (15,800)

April 19, 1986 - Road Warriors b Magnum T.A. & Ronnie Garvin to win Crockett Cup tag team tournament, Ric Flair b Dusty Rhodes via DQ to retain NWA title, Jim Duggan b Dick Slater to retain North American title. Other teams in tournament: Wahoo McDaniel & Mark Youngblood, Mike Miller & Bobby Jagers, Sam Houston & Nelson Royal, Bart & Brad Batten, Bobby Eaton & Dennis Condrey, Arn Anderson & Tully Blanchard, Stan Lane & Steve Keirn, Tommy Rogers & Bobby Fulton, Hector & Chavo Guerrero, The Shepherders (Bushwhackers), Ricky Morton & Robert Gibson, Ivan & Nikita Koloff, The Barbarian & Baron Von Raschke, Jimmy Valiant & Manny Fernandez, Steve Williams & Terry Taylor, Bill Dundee & Buddy Landel, Koko Ware & Italian Stallion, Buzz Sawyer & Rick Steiner, Brett Wayne & D.J. Peterson, Black Bart & Jimmy Garvin and Giant Baba & Tiger Mask (Mitsuharu Misawa) (13,000)

April 2, 1989 - Ric Flair b Ricky Steamboat 2/3 falls to retain NWA title, Steve Williams & Mike Rotunda b Road Warriors to win NWA tag titles (5,300; 1,500 paid)